

SECOND STRING QUARTET (1986)

Andrew Violette's Second String Quartet is a half-hour long meditation on the Gregorian chant *Libera Me*, which is traditionally sung at the Burial Service. Throughout the quartet's 1,061 measures the pitch G is keened, sometimes almost imperceptibly, other times as the sole pitch played by the four instruments.

While liturgical plainsong and its musical descendants, such as organum, supply many of the techniques utilized, the quartet also draws heavily on an equally ancient musical culture: Hindu music. These two styles (and, incidentally, many other traditional musical styles) have more in common than might, at first blush, seem obvious. Both use melodic modes with a center tone, which in medieval music are seven note variants of the diatonic scale, and in Hindu music are gapped scales, usually containing five or six tones, chosen from a twenty-two pitch scale; both feature repetitive rhythmic patterns called rhythmic modes in medieval music and the *tala* in Hindu music; both make use of elaborate melodic ornamentations -- a good example of this in Western music is melismatic organum, and in Hindu music this is generally called *gamaka*; both share certain forms -- for instance, the *responsorium* and the *khyal* are rondo-like forms in plain chant and Hindu music, respectively; and, both have a version of the drone, which in Western liturgical music might be the tenor singing the long *cantus firmus* notes in organum, and in Hindu music is provided by the *tambura*, a kind of fretless lute. These common elements, albeit transformed and expanded, play a major role in the piece.

The Second String Quartet is in two large sections, played without pause. The first section is tinged with the flavor of Western liturgical music; the second section is more closely allied to the *tambura* and drums of Eastern music. Transitions from one section to the other, as well as from each important subsidiary section to the next, are marked by solitary G's. The entire piece is based on a six note mode: G, A-flat, B-flat, C-sharp, D and F, which is itself composed of two non-symmetric three note cells spaced a tritone apart (on the pitches G and C-sharp). Unlike many of Mr. Violette's works in recent years, which use modes that are combinatorial at the tritone, the Second String Quartet's mode does not display this characteristic. Instead, the six transpositions of the mode which contain the pitch G are used; they are the mode starting on pitches C, C-sharp, E, F-sharp, G and A. It is interesting to note that if these six starting pitches are reordered thus: F-sharp, G, A, C, C-sharp and E, they are the constituent pitches of the mode at the tritone.

A brief description of the quartet's physiognomy follows.

First Section

The first section comprises seven subsidiary sections in alternating slow and fast tempos and lasts about 15 minutes. It has the character of an elaborately worked out instrumental motet. Each subsection is listed below with its approximate duration.

1. Andante	(♩ = 46)	2 minutes
2. Allegro con brio	(♩ = 208)	1 1/2 minutes
3. Andante	(♩ = 46)	3 1/2 minutes
4. Allegro con brio	(♩ = 208)	1/2 minute
5. Andante	(♩ = 46)	3/4 minute
6. Allegro molto	(♩ = 184)	1/2 minute
7. Meno mosso	(♩ = 168)	6 minutes

In order for the listener better to grasp the form of this section, s/he must first be aware of the structure of the Gregorian chant responsorium, *Libera Me*, upon which it is based. The responsorium has a rondo-like form in which a chorus (i.e., the response) alternates with a solo voice (i.e., the verse). The responsorium was actively practiced in medieval times (i.e., approximately 5th to 14th centuries A.D.), but has its roots in an even more ancient tradition, that of the Jewish Service, when a cantor sang the verses and the congregation sang the response.

Libera Me has seven sections (as does the first section of the quartet) arranged as follows: full response, verse 1, abridgement of full response, verse 2, different abridgement of full response, verse 3, full response (as at the beginning). Each of the quartet's seven subsidiary sections corresponds to one of the seven parts of the *Libera Me* chant, the slower sections being associated with the response and the fast sections, the verses. This naturally affords numerous opportunities for word painting and, in fact, this section of the quartet abounds in word painting. For example, in the first Allegro con brio subsection, the instruments are literally tremulous; and, in the second Andante (the third subsection), corresponding to the words "when the heavens and the earth shall shake", the instruments literally quaver. Another striking instance of word painting occurs as an overlap between the fifth (Andante) and sixth (Allegro molto) subsections. The beginning of the Allegro molto is imbued with the last word of the fifth subsection, "fire". Its upward sweeping figures chased by their downward plunging inversions resemble nothing so much as complete alarm. Only the last note of the Allegro molto, a long-held G, hints, like an incantation, at the words "Grant them eternal rest, O Lord ...". The Allegro molto subsection reappears at the end of the Second String Quartet and concludes the work.

A translation of *Libera Me* follows.

1.,7. Full Response

Deliver me, O Lord, from eternal death on that awesome day,
When the heavens and the earth shall shake,
When thou comest to judge the world with fire.

2. Verse 1

I am made to tremble and I fear when the judgement comes,
And thy wrath is upon us.

3. Abridged Response

When the heavens and the earth shall shake.

4. Verse 2

That day, day of wrath, calamity and woe, great day
And bitter in truth.

5. Abridged Response

When thou comest to judge the world with fire.

6. Verse 3

Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may eternal light shine
upon them.

Second Section

Allegro Giusto

(♩ = 208)

Allegro Molto (Reprise)

(♩ = 184)

approx. 15 min.

♩ = 208

The second section of the Second String Quartet is a whirlwind series of 49 pervasive permutations over a thirteen bar tala (presented initially as a series of G's plucked by the strings).

Like much Hindu music, an air of improvisation conceals a set of rigorously restrictive ground rules designed to provide form and structure to the playing. Also similar to Hindu music is the sense of "warming up", each player loosing the mind and fingers for the greater intensity to come.

In the second permutation, the first violin plays the rhythm which is the seed for all subsequent permutations. The section is organized into three groups of thirteen permutations and a coda of nine permutations. The permutative techniques extend to many aspects of the music including rhythm, combinations of instruments, voicing of chords and spacing of the pitch G, and mode of attack. The effect this music has on the listener is koan-like: something changing very fast within something changing very slowly at the same time something is changing very slowly within something changing very fast.

Pizzicato effects are a mainstay of the first group of permutations. During the last permutation of this group, the first violin, viola and cello play a line reminiscent of some of the plain chant in the first section. The second group of permutations (starting with permutation 14) is recognizable by a fortissimo C minor chord quadruple-stopped by all four instruments. This group of thirteen permutations is played arco. Starting in permutation 15 and continuing through the end of the group (permutation 26), the first violin begins playing the line assigned to it at the beginning of the quartet. Pizzicato effects recommence with the third group of permutations (i.e., permutation 27). Noticeable here is the growing rhythmic intensity and faster shifting among combinations of instruments. The first violin plays the Dies Irae during the last permutations of this group (i.e., 38 and 39). The fortieth permutation is labeled "Ringing Changes", and in it the quartet players, amid a welter of double, triple, and quadruple stops on a G dominant seventh chord, become the embodiment of drone and percussion. The fury doesn't abate until permutation 44, when an exact reprise of the Allegro molto music from the first section is reintroduced to conclude the quartet (in the first section too, the listener is led into the Allegro molto section by a G dominant seventh chord).

The quartet ends on an imperceptibly bowed G played by the four instruments, which dies out slowly from a fortissimo to a pianisissimo, and looks on the page eerily like a flat electrocardiograph.

It would take program notes at least this long to lay out the mathematical underpinning of the Second Quartet. In the interest of parsimony, suffice it to say that Fibonacci series and parquet deformation techniques are extensively utilized. In the last analysis, however, the music must stand on its own as an intrinsically captivating sequence of sound events, with the generative techniques subtly droning in the background.